

HE'S BLIND, BUT HE BUILT HIS
OWN HOUSE

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND**



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Francis A'bert Burdett, a blind man of Wayne, New Jersey, and the seven-room house he built for himself and his wife

He's Blind, But He Built His Own House



DURING the past few months the little township of Wayne, New Jersey, has come into considerable fame, for within its borders is located what has been appropriately called, "The House That Was Built in the Dark."

From many parts of the United States and even from foreign countries have come people to see this two-and-one-half-story Dutch Colonial structure, which is the only building of its kind and size in the world known to have been erected by a man who is totally blind. That man is Francis Albert Burdett. With his wife, he now lives in the dwelling which he, without assistance, labored patiently for more than two years to build.

Recently I had the pleasure of making a careful inspection of the blind man's house. As Mr. Burdett led me through the various rooms, he told me some interesting things about his life and how he came to undertake the tedious task of erecting his own home, as well as a few of the many difficulties he encountered during his work.

"I was born sixty-six years ago in Birmingham, England," he said. "My parents came to this country when I was but two years of age, and settled at Trenton, New Jersey. Later, we moved to Providence, Rhode Island, where my father, a jeweler by trade, went into partnership with another man and opened a small shop."

In 1884 Mr. Burdett married Mary A. MacInnes, and for many years worked as a goldsmith. Later he conducted a jewelry store in East Providence where, in his workshop, he made watches and fashioned delicate rings, brooches, and

other ornaments from his own designs.

One day, a few weeks after he had celebrated his fiftieth birthday, he was struck by a moving-van. As he could walk home and attend to his regular duties, no serious consideration was given the accident at the time. It was not long, however, before it was seen that the injury had affected his optic nerve and that he was rapidly losing his sight. Even as darkness closed about him, he refused to abandon his shop, but it was a struggle against the inevitable.

He at once began seeking something else to do, and his ability to use tools, accompanied by a supersensitive touch, prompted him to construct small chairs, dressers, fancy trays, bird houses, tables for children, and many serviceable articles. These he either sold or gave to his friends.

"But this did not bring in sufficient money to maintain a home," he told me. "Consequently, my wife found it necessary to go out nursing. Often I would not hear her voice for a whole month. Left at home alone, I soon learned to build and control a fire, bake bread, prepare meals, and do the general housework."

"After the Armistice, we moved to Wayne, making our home with a married daughter. Four years ago, Mrs. Burdett and I felt the need of having our own home once more. With what little money we possessed, we purchased a lot and the necessary materials. In several months, working alone, I built a two-room shack."

"This experience gave me confidence that I could erect a larger and more substantial house—one patterned after the Dutch Colonial structure in which we had resided in Rhode Island before my sight

left me. Blindness and semi-deafness were not the only obstacles that confronted me. My trade was that of a jeweler and not a carpenter; and I had to start without a dollar, for all we owned was the lot bought on time payments. No one would lend a blind man money with which to build, particularly when I had no plans and specifications to file."

None of these handicaps, however, deterred him from his course. After establishing a credit account with a good-natured lumber dealer, he began forming his plans.

"After I had acted as my own architect, cutting out the plans in cardboard and storing away on the shelves of my mind all of the details of construction, I made three ladders and a sectional tool house," Mr. Burdett continued. "I was then ready to begin the actual work on the dwelling, which, when completed, was to be thirty-five feet long, twenty-eight feet wide, and thirty feet high, and contain seven rooms, a bath, and a large attic."

Every morning, for more than two years, his little grandson led him to the building under construction, where on more than one occasion, the blind builder remained on the job long after the neighbors had retired. That he has an almost infallible memory will be seen in the fact that he was able to remember the progress of the house in its various stages of development.

Day after day he labored as unconcernedly on the roof as he did on the ground; leaned over the eaves; walked over open floor beams; climbed up and down long ladders; put up scaffolding; carried and placed all the heavy timber and planks

that were needed, from the sills on the foundation to the rafters on the roof; in brief, he did the entire job, except the masonry and plumbing. Just one misstep or a moment's forgetfulness might have meant his death.

"While laboring on the house, I met with all sorts of difficulties," he said. "One particularly hard and perilous job was the Dutch Colonial roof. I had cut out a cardboard pattern for this and, therefore, had a definite idea of what was to be done. I ran my fingers over the edge of the form and found where the ridge-

board was connected. I realized that it was going to be a very high place to reach.

"Finally, after much thought, I hit upon a plan. I took the center stud down and cut it off six inches; then I nailed a piece of two-by-four on each side, thereby forming a pocket. While I had this stud, I fastened on it a length of one-by-two, which extended several feet above the pocket. To this I connected a rope and pulley. I did the same with the rear stud, replaced them in position, tied the rope to each end of that long board, and alter-

nately pulled each end until both were above the pocket. I then lowered them in. After I had things more secure, enabling me to work around those parts with a degree of safety, I nailed both ends fast and removed the sticks and pulleys!

"When I had finished hauling all of the heavy beams up to the attic floor, I cut the lumber. I nailed the rafters to the ridgeboard and to the hips."

Save for six shingles which were laid wrong side out on the south section of the roof, the house is a perfect specimen of expert workmanship. ALBERT R. BEATTY

Jake Surface is Buying a Town on the Installment Plan



His home is a two-room shack set in a garden of burdock, alfalfa, and snakeweed—the only vegetation that will grow on the sun-baked, unfertile soil of an Indianapolis dump. His front door opens on a landscape sprinkled with rusty cans, shapeless automobile fenders, piles of worn-out casings, hopeless inner tubes, broken and bottomless chairs, and empty barrels—all the desolate wastage, in fact, of a prosperous city.

To Jake Surface, however, his dump is far from desolate. It is a source of health, happiness, and profit—a profit that Jake earns by "working" the dump, sorting the trash that is unloaded there and selling whatever part of it is salable to Indianapolis junkmen who, in turn, find markets for it where it is turned into some useful commodity.

The chief "lines" that Jake handles are old copper wire, which, after the insulation is burned off, brings eight cents a pound; aluminum—of which it takes a lot to weigh a pound that brings Jake twelve cents; light brass, worth three cents a pound; heavy brass, which brings four cents; paper, good for thirty cents the hundred pounds; books and magazines, a source of profit at fifty cents the hundred; "common seams" (the trade name for old carpets and dirty rags), sixty cents the hundred; clean rags, eighty cents the hundred; bottles, one cent each; old inner tubes and casings, sixty cents the hundred; and barrels, cheap at ten cents each for the light ones and twenty-five cents for the heavy oak variety.

From this assortment Jake gathers and sorts, in a week, enough material of various kinds to pay the owners of the dump from five dollars a week in midwinter to twenty-five dollars a week in summer. For his work, he earns a regular weekly salary of ten dollars, clear profit—and with this income he's buying himself a town—the little village of Waverly, Indiana, fifteen miles south of Indianapolis.

Already, during the past four years, he has saved enough to buy seven of the thirty houses which comprise the town. At that rate, he figures, it will take him about ten years more to complete the transaction. By that time he will be just seventy-eight years old, and, if his health



Despite the fact that his salary is only ten dollars a week, Jake Surface, of Indiana, is buying a town

is poor, he may consider quitting work.

"I'm not planning to quit, though, unless I'm too feeble to stir," he explains, "because I'd be miserable if I didn't have something like this to keep me busy. I've worked every day as far back as I can remember—cuttin' timber, ditchin', haulin'—good hard work that keeps a man healthy.

"But none of them jobs was as interestin' and pleasant as workin' the dump, though I've only been at this two years. Still, in that time I've stuck around pretty

close to home—one time I wasn't off the dump for nine weeks, and I only go downtown once or twice a year. I had a right good time my last trip, though."

The "right good time," it was finally revealed, was the chance Uncle Jake found to play Santa Claus out of season to a group of little street urchins hanging around a neighborhood motion picture show.

"When I asked them how they'd like to see the show," Uncle Jake said, "they looked me over disbelievin' like and accused me of stringin' them, but you ought to have seen them when I bought eleven tickets for the show and sent them all in.

"It's just amazin' the amount of good wearin' apparel folks throw away these days," he went on. "It's a wasteful world we're livin' in, but I'm not complainin'—them that waste keep them that need in comfort—and keep me in a job, too." For Uncle Jake collects clothes for the poor from the bundles and boxes thrown on the dump.

Jake Surface has another clarity in his dog refuge, where he welcomes stray, homeless, forlorn dogs. Sometimes there are as many as sixteen dogs living in the empty barrels that Uncle Jake provides for kennels. For many of the dogs he finds homes, but those that no one else wants he keeps, and they repay his kindness by hunting rats on the dump by day and guarding the shack at night.

"I don't save money just for the sake of the money," he said. "I just don't see any need of spending it, so I put it away until I have enough to buy another house, and then I know it's well and safely invested. I'm able to save at least ten dollars every week. That makes more than five hundred dollars every year, and five hundred dollars will buy a three- or four-room house in Waverly. And with the rents of the ones I have pilin' up, it won't take long to have all the town I can use.

"Maybe, then, I'll pick me out a house near the crick and just sit on the front porch and fish—but probably I won't. More than likely I'll just keep right on workin'. The fact is, if I was worth a million, I'd go right on down to the dumpin' ground to see what the newest load of trash had useful in it." LEONORA K. ROSS

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